

Council holds off vote on savings plan

■ Members fear proposals will lead to slower fire-rescue response

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The Montgomery County Council held off voting on a \$23.6 million in cost-cutting recommendations Tuesday after members said they had concerns about how some of the cuts would increase ambulance and fire ladder truck response times, take away free bus rides for students and eliminate some health services for people in need.

With the county facing a \$401 million deficit in fiscal 2009, Leggett initiated a hiring freeze and sent the 2 percent across-the-board cost-cutting measure to the council on Dec. 21 as a way to get a jump on the shortfall. Fiscal 2009 starts July 1.

The council returned from the holiday recess on Monday with more questions and concerns about Leggett's savings plans.

"Cutting 2 percent across the board cuts programs that work and programs that don't work," said Councilman Mark Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park at a council retreat on Monday at the Rockville Public Library.

Council President Michael Knapp had hoped to reach an agreement with council

members at the retreat to have a decision on the plan Tuesday, but other council members said they needed more time for review.

Several council members had particular concerns about plans to save money through the fire department.

The fire department would see more than \$3.7 million in cuts under the proposal, including \$740,000 savings by not staffing the Germantown rescue squad, which could result in longer response times if enough volunteers did not show up to the station. Another \$400,000 would be saved by reducing overtime for emergency medics by transferring resources from Glen Echo and Laytonsville, which also would increase response times to those communities overnight, according to the fiscal note.

Almost \$1 million would be saved by taking a ladder truck out of the Hillandale fire station, which would increase the time it takes to put out a fire because ladder trucks would have to come from other fire stations farther away.

"If the intent was to give us cuts we intentionally couldn't stomach ... I know how these budget games are played," said



Leggett

Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park at Tuesday's meeting.

But County Fire Chief Thomas W. Carr Jr. said he picked the cuts that would have the lowest impact on residents. The elimination of staffing the Germantown rescue squad would be offset by a paramedic riding with a fire engine on medical calls, which would provide a first response until an ambulance arrived, Carr said. Taking the ladder truck out of the Hillandale fire station is done now whenever other ladder trucks go out of service for maintenance, Carr said.

"We're in a time of growth and we shouldn't be cutting," Carr said. "If I have to do something, this is the least offensive, the one I can tolerate."

Increasing response times goes against everything the county has been trying to do for emergency services, said Councilman Philip M. Andrews (D-Dist. 3) of Gaithersburg, chairman of the public safety committee.

Council members also said too many of the cuts were not going to solve the long-term budget problems since they involved not filling vacancies for the rest of this fiscal year, but filling them in the next.

"Too much of the savings rely on lapse," said Councilwoman Marilyn J. Praisner (D-Dist. 4) of Calverton. "Unless we vigorously review those positions that are lapsing, we're just putting it off for today."

Praisner also questioned several of the other savings proposed by Leggett, including the free Ride On program for students.

"I personally don't want to," she said of cutting the program. "I think it encourages the kind of participation we need in public transit."

Some council members questioned whether Leggett would consider alternative savings recommendations from them if they did not approve several of his specific recommendations.

The council should identify the cost reductions they have concerns with and any alternatives for savings by Thursday so that Leggett would have time to review them and respond by Tuesday, Knapp said.

Whether Leggett would agree with alternative cuts would depend on the cuts, said his spokesman Patrick Laceyfield.

"We don't like anything we sent over either," Laceyfield said. "There're a lot of hard choices to make in this fiscal year. We're committed to working with the council, but we're also committed to saving money in the here and now. There's no question there's some pain in these cuts. We tried to minimize that as much as possible. Let's see what their recommendations are. I heard folks talk about things they didn't want to see in the [savings] plan. We didn't hear what they would substitute for them."